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# **The agency of habitus: Bourdieu at the conjunction of Marxism, phenomenology and structuralism**

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## **Abstract**

The prolific and varied body of work produced by Pierre Bourdieu is coming once again to be appreciated after two decades of an “ebb tide” that typically follows the attainment of a world reputation in the social and behavioural sciences. In Bourdieu’s case the ebb has been increased by resentments and misunderstandings that can be traced to the historical and political context in which he conducted his research and analysis: a context dominated by a doctrinaire Marxism which Bourdieu, who refused to take the easy route to scholarly acceptance, contested. This led to readings of his work that are seriously out of line with what he actually wrote, and contemporary scholars continue in large part to accept these unsustainable characterisations of his views based on second-hand information and selective reading rather than on a thorough understanding of his work. Bourdieu’s unparalleled contribution to solving, or at least dealing with, the perennial paradox of agency versus social determinism, is possibly more relevant now than it was during the years in which he was active, yet to make use of it requires a thorough, unprejudiced examination of his key concepts – habitus, field, and symbolic capital, power and violence – within the context of struggle amongst proponents of Marxism, phenomenology and structuralism in which they were produced.

Marcel Mauss once said to us, “I call sociology all science that has been done well”.

Georges Dumézil (1988), p. 11

## **1 Introduction**

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) usually gets classed as a sociologist, and it was the chair of sociology that he occupied in the Collège de France, but other sociologists saw his work as belonging more to anthropology or ethnography, or perhaps social or educational psychology. He was part of a generation of elite students in the late 1940s and 1950s whose studies followed a much less specialised route than that taken by their Anglophone contemporaries, or indeed by most of their

French contemporaries. His degree was in philosophy, at a time when he and his fellow philosophy students in the École Normale Supérieure looked upon sociology with contempt (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 5). As late as the 1960s, psychology and sociology did not have their own university departments, but were taught within departments of philosophy (Eribon, 1989, p. 155).<sup>1</sup> Such institutional disciplinary recognition as they had came from the existence of chairs of psychology and sociology in the Collège de France, which however was not a university and awarded no degrees. The epigraph to this paper shows how even the doyen of French sociology, Marcel Mauss, whose uncle Émile Durkheim had held the first chair of sociology in France, strove to keep the field free of strict boundaries which might tend to ghettoise it.

Philosophy remained the “queen” of sciences, with linguistics as its methodological prime minister during this period dominated by structuralism, though linguistics as a scholarly specialisation remained well down the pecking order. In the end philosophy is perhaps where Bourdieu’s work may be most cogently situated – although philosophers have been less eager even than sociologists to claim him as one of them. He was a maverick, which is to say that he did not feel obliged to build upon existing analyses of how societies are structured and operate. What drew his attention were the questions which, although obvious ones to ask, went unasked.

Concerning academic classifications, Bourdieu told an interviewer:

I even think that one of the obstacles to the progress of research is this classificatory mode of functioning of academic and political thought, which often hamstring intellectual inventiveness by making it impossible to surpass false antinomies and false divisions. The logic of the classificatory label is very exactly that of racism, which stigmatizes its victims by imprisoning them in a negative essence. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 28)

If one had to designate his specialised field, it would perhaps best be described as theory-and-practice, and there is no specific term for someone who takes that as their core problem to investigate. The closest is perhaps Marxist theoretician, but that suggests a specific affiliation, not

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<sup>1</sup> Psychiatry was not counted as a *science humaine* but a branch of medicine.

just to a doctrine but, especially in the 1960s and 70s, to a political party, and toeing a party line is what mavericks refuse to do. The question of whether they cannot, or they will not, is an instance of the fundamental problem of predisposition and the choices people make – and that is Bourdieu's key question. His impact has been wide-ranging, but certain concepts in particular have had significant resonance:

- the *symbolic capital* which particular forms of a language bring to their speakers, whilst other forms do not,
- the *symbolic power and violence* through which the social norms of acceptable language are reproduced, sometimes with the complicity of the speakers who are led to conform,
- the *habitus*, which embodies (literally) the tension between individual agency and social forces, and occupies a position in a *field* with other habitus, each defined by their difference from the others.

Agency and social forces: that is where *will* bumps into *can*. The embodiment is literal because my habitus is the social forces, the external world, as represented within me (the nature of the representation being another key question). "The body is in the social world but the social world is also in the body" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 190). The crux of debate in sociology since its founding as an academic discipline has been the relationship between individual and society, in terms both of how the more abstract concept of society is to be understood, and whether its operation in individuals is best revealed through analysis of an internal, psychological kind, or external observation with statistical or ethnographic-interpretative analysis: emic or etic, to use terms that originated within linguistics. Again, however, Bourdieu's writings do not fall so much within the tradition of sociology as of theory-and-practice, the terms of which were set by Marxist thought, which he dared to challenge head-on at a time when doing so risked academic marginalisation. "And since Marx went to such lengths to claim the title of scientist, the only fitting homage to pay him is to use what he did, and what others have done with what he did, so as to surpass what he thought he did" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 49). But neither is it easy to situate Bourdieu's work with respect to

structuralism, which has sometimes been seen as an alternative to Marxism, other times as reconcilable with it.

Each of the words italicised in the set of bullet points above derives its meaning from its opposition to a dominant assumption. *Symbolic* is a direct challenge to the core Marxist concept of the base – work, production, class struggle and the economic forces they generate – out of which arise cultural, institutional and other symbolic reflections in superstructure, which is clearly secondary. *Capital* reinforces this challenge by asserting that this cornerstone of Marxism, *Das Kapital*, takes in a far wider conception of the means of production of value than the physical goods put out by factories that are the sole property of a ruling class, even if they largely set the terms by which symbolic value is defined.

Similarly, *power* is visible and palpable at all levels of human relations, and is exercised not so much with chains and guns as with subtly condescending speech acts and withering glances – the effect of which can be experienced as *violence* more enduringly painful and effective than the lash of a whip, and not different in kind from the class violence by which the bourgeoisie extracts labour from the workers. As for *habitus*, by relocating all these concepts from the struggle between social classes to every individual within every class, down to each fibre of who they are, it could be argued that it is the ultimate extension of Marx's insight. But to the Marxist dogmatists who dominated the period in which Bourdieu came on the scene, extensions were not just unnecessary, but inherently subversive. Which, to a degree they were; but with Bourdieu little is black-and-white, apart from the photographic chronicles which formed part of his fieldwork method in Algeria (see Schultheis, Holder & Wagner, 2009; Bourdieu ed., 1965).

If Bourdieu's writings on language (especially his 1982 and 1991 books,<sup>2</sup> though issues of language crop up in all his work) get classified under sociolinguistics, they are not sociolinguistic in the usual sense, just as his sociology extended beyond the generally observed limits of that

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<sup>2</sup> The 1991 book has a complex history: it is a selection of chapters from the 1982 book, supplemented with other chapters deriving from articles by Bourdieu, and was first published in English translation, before later being published in French.

discipline. He never characterised himself as a linguist, though linguistics did come within the scope of his studies and his teaching.

Across the many fields in which Bourdieu's work has found applications, opposition to his analysis and conclusions began immediately, and it has never wholly abated. The reception of his work was entangled with the fate of Marxism and structuralism, itself a more complicated matter than is generally appreciated, and with how Bourdieu's thought was seen as relating to global political events. The two decades since his death have seen a continued profusion of opinions in which his conceptions are disparaged. In part this is the "ebb tide" effect that follows every sustained and spectacular career, even more in intellectual fields than in artistic ones.<sup>3</sup> These reversals of reception can be temporary, and the recent publication of *The Oxford Handbook to Pierre Bourdieu* (Medvetz & Sallaz eds, 2018) can be taken as one of the signs marking the end of this particular ebb.

Approaching twenty years' distance from Bourdieu's death, we are in a position to separate substance from hype, and indeed theory from practice, though the separation continues to be hindered by a number of complications. One is the difficulty of situating Bourdieu's work within a particular disciplinary tradition, when it was produced in a genuine belief that crossing academic boundaries was the best way to shed light on the problems and paradoxes inherent in each of the disciplines involved. Another is the difficulty of situating Bourdieu in relation to structuralism, a movement which itself remains insufficiently defined, and of appreciating not just the epistemological but also the political stakes of the positions taken in the 1960s and after.

The third difficulty is one shared by many thinkers who write in a didactic style which does not proclaim conclusions but instead leads readers patiently through the steps toward them, so that they will arrive at the conclusions themselves, or at least understand how the author came to them. The positions Bourdieu took were nearly always synthetic ones, which is to say that they arose from the recognition of the partial truth of both of a thesis and an antithesis. In following his exposition

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<sup>3</sup> Cram (2007) provides a good study of ebb tides in the history of linguistics.

and argumentation we encounter cases in which, when treating a thesis, he presents strong statements of its antithesis, and vice-versa, and we need to keep bearing in mind that he is not arguing either side exclusively, but working his way toward a synthesis. This is hard for us readers, who are generally impatient; when we see a strong statement, we are inclined to take it as the author's conclusion rather than as one of the steps leading to a conclusion that may be directly or obliquely opposed to it.

The aim of this paper is to present as fully rounded a view of Bourdieu's analysis of language as possible. It merits such attention, in the face of rejection based on partial understanding. More than that, it requires us to face up to those core questions that underlie the work of sociolinguists and applied linguists, regarding the relationship of theory and practice, structures and subjects, culture and individual agency, the nature of society, economic and symbolic capital, the mental and the bodily, and how social forces function not just around us but within us. In doing this, it is impossible to avoid facing some of the very issues that are at the heart of Bourdieu's own enquiry. His most direct contribution to the structuralist debates of the mid-1960s was his article on "intellectual field and creative project" (Bourdieu, 1966), and his own creative project needs to be understood in terms of the intellectual field within which it arose, along with all the questions that entails about the extent to which the field and its practitioners shaped his individual project, both in what he accepted from them and what he rejected, and in their role in determining the project's subsequent fortunes.

## **2      Situating Bourdieu**

It is easy now to forget that, across the twentieth century, a particular discourse of theory and practice was so dominant that even those who wanted to alter or contest it had to do so on its terms in order to get a hearing. Marxism is an economic, social and political theory with a philosophical foundation. It was put into practice in some of the world's largest and most powerful countries, and even countries that opposed it had to acknowledge its power. Economists and social and political

theorists who wanted to contest aspects of Marxism were still obliged to conduct the discourse of theory and practice in the terms that Marx had set, and risked being denounced as running dogs of capitalist imperialism even in countries that had not undergone a Marxist revolution. Its philosophical underpinnings included a theory of historical materialism in which social and cultural changes unfold inevitably, with a momentum that might be slowed but not stopped – a theory to which the rapidity of the global spread of Marxism lent credibility.

After the Soviet criticism of Stalin following his death in 1953, and the invasion of Hungary in 1960, the younger generation of academics were less inclined to receive Marxism as a liberating discourse. Those who did not leave the Communist Party hardened their dogmatic adherence to it. So it was always a bold and risky move to attempt to tamper with the dogma rather than simply apply it. The first point at which it appeared unsatisfactory was its definition of practice, which Marxists insist must be the source of all theory. Theory that is not grounded in practice is regarded as inherently bourgeois and counter-revolutionary. The trouble is that it is not obvious that we ever engage in any practice without having a theory of some sort behind it, whether or not we are aware of it.

Theory is not restricted to what is published in books, or even what is articulated overtly. When an anthropologist finds a group with a firmly established set of marriage practices, for example, there is at work something other than pure practice, and which it would be hard to justify not calling a theory. If the anthropologist asks members of the group to explain their practices and their answer differs from what the anthropologist's analysis shows, we may be dealing with two theories; but if one of them is downgraded to being a "folk" account, and only the outsider's scientific analysis qualifies as theory (not that present-day anthropologists would do this, though many linguists continue to), we still have to deal with the problem of how this theory does not simply follow from the practice, but guides the practice.



With Marx, the point is not simply to analyse and understand practice, but to change it.<sup>4</sup>

Theory is one of the means to that end, but as always, action – *praxis*, to use the Greek word which was revived in the nineteenth century for this direct, radical change of practice – comes first. What some found unsatisfactory in Marxism was the drive for revolutionary praxis without a thorough understanding of how practice is formulated, maintained, transmitted and reproduced: what Bourdieu calls a “theory of practice”, and which has to emerge from close and sustained observation of conditions on the ground. But no one found this less acceptable than Marx himself did. For example, when

in the late summer of 1850 Marx concluded that European capitalism had entered a period of prosperity and there would be no new revolution in the period ahead, he was faced with opposition from an important section of League members headed by Willich and Schapper. Combating their voluntarism he said that, instead of studying the real conditions, they had made “the will alone into the driving force of revolution” (Johnstone, 1967, citing Marx, 1960, p. 412).

The key word is *alone*. Neither social conditions alone nor wilful agency alone will make for a successful revolution. Only their synthesis will do so.

However, for Marx to say this in 1850 was one thing; for Bourdieu to articulate the same message to Marxists in the late 1950s was quite another. The revolution taking place in the latter context was the Algerian war of independence, and what was at stake was more than just economic. The struggle for radical change, if not informed by a solid theory of practice, might amount to violence followed by a systematic oppression that would reproduce, if not exceed, the oppression it was meant to overthrow.

France had been through this before, with the Revolution of 1789 and the Reign of Terror which followed, before giving way to the Napoleonic Empire that portrayed itself as the Revolution’s

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<sup>4</sup> The *locus classicus* for this is Marx’s (1969) Theses on Feuerbach (written 1845), including the 11th and last thesis, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it”.

true legacy, bringing liberation and enlightenment to all of Europe. Then a series of royal and imperial restorations, over the course of which an overseas empire was created – an empire which began to unravel in the 1950s, just when Stalinism was unraveling in the USSR. Those who had toed the party line in the West were confronted with irrefutable evidence, not from the CIA but from the Supreme Soviet, that they had been useful idiots supporting a tyrannical monster, and they were sharply divided in their response. The split was made both personal and iconic in the sudden and bitter break between Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, France's two leading philosophers, heretofore closely allied. Sartre represented those who saw in the Soviet repudiation of Stalin the ability of the regime to confront its past failings and head toward an ideal future. Merleau-Ponty was one of those so disillusioned as to be left unable to believe – a position that was confirmed three years later with the invasion of Hungary, though the true believers were able to rationalise this into a progressive step as well.

Where imperialism, in the form of French colonies, was concerned, the picture was blurred by the revolutions in Indochina and Algeria being conceived simultaneously as wars of liberation from foreign rule and from capitalism, with the Chinese revolution offering guiding principles, and with elements loyal to the USSR or to the Chinese Communist Party, or both, prominent amongst the revolutionary forces. The academic Marxists benefitted from student exemptions from military service, until they completed their degree, as did Bourdieu in 1955. He was then sent to serve in Algeria, and his experience there would shape his future intellectual trajectory – and through his influence, those of students and researchers in a wide range of fields. The army taught him lessons about the limits of the logic of practice:

[T]he logic of practice lies in being logical to the point at which being logical would cease being practical. In the French army, they used to teach you – and perhaps they still do – how to take a step forward: it's clear that nobody would be able to walk or march if they had to conform to the theory of how to take a step in order to walk. Codification may be antinomic to the application of the code. All codifying activity must thus be accompanied by a theory of the

effect of codification, for fear of unconsciously substituting the objectified logic of the code for the codified logic of the practical models and the partial logic of practice that they generate.

(Bourdieu, 1990, p. 79)

As his dissertation in philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure, Bourdieu had submitted a translation of and commentary on the *Animadversiones* of Leibniz, who would remain his intellectual beacon throughout his life. He undertook a doctoral thesis on “the ‘phenomenology of emotional life’, or more exactly into the temporal structures of emotional experience” (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 6-7), starting from Husserl, but eventually abandoned it, and never received a doctorate (Bourdieu, 2004, pp. 49, 57). Despite the war of independence from French colonial rule that was raging in Algeria when he arrived, he would later say that “I was crazy about this country. I was truly in love with this country” (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 235, my translation). He completed his obligatory service in 1957, but returned the following year, when things had quietened down in Algiers, although fighting continued in the mountains. He took a post as *assistant* in the University of Algiers, where he was assigned courses in philosophy and sociology, a field in which he was not trained, but began to teach himself by devouring books principally by American sociologists, rather than the French tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1959 he gave a course on Durkheim, as well as one on Saussure (Lescourret, 2008, p. 91; Bourdieu, 1990, p. 6). With the instincts of a good teacher who has been assigned to lecture on a subject in which he was feeling his way, to students who were genuinely eager to learn, and who would be ill served if he merely repeated what was in the textbook, he sent them out to undertake original field research, in which he joined them. The material they gathered forms the basis of much of Bourdieu’s subsequent work. If it appears to be more in the nature of anthropology

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<sup>5</sup> Lescourret (2008, p. 113 and *passim*) identifies Robert K. Merton, Talcott Parsons and Paul Lazarsfeld as Bourdieu’s three main sources. In later years however he would speak of the “Parsons-Merton-Lazarsfeld triangle” as “a sort of intellectual holding company which led an almost conscious strategy of ideological domination”, and which “carried off the amazing feat of talking about the social world as it it wasn’t talking about it at all”. He contrasts them with the Chicago School sociologists led by George Herbert Mead, who described “real circles and real people” (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 36-38). See also Dubois, Durant & Winkin (2005, pp. 327-328).

than sociology, that is partly reflective of a colonialist division of labour between the two fields. A non-urban sociology of Algeria is bound to look anthropological to a Western observer, who would find it hard to distinguish between an anthropological and a sociological study of a Western urban setting, unless by forcing anthropology into a more discursive mode and sociology into a more statistical one, though these orientations are not inherent to either discipline (see Wallerstein, 2003). When an interviewer put it to him that he “became an ethnologist to begin with”, he replied that “I thought of myself as a philosopher and it took me a very long time to admit to myself that I had become an ethnologist” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 7).<sup>6</sup> In another interview given in the same year he said that “all my work, for more than twenty years, has aimed at abolishing the separation of sociology from ethnology” (ibid., p. 74).

In 1960, the revolutionary uprising in Algiers reignited. Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers* depicts the situation as Bourdieu saw it: neither side was intrinsically evil, but history had landed them both in a situation such that each side felt that it had no choice but to commit inhuman acts. In the film, the captured leader of the FLN, asked by the head of the French forces whether he still thinks he has a chance of defeating them, replies that the insurgents have a better chance of defeating the colonisers than France has of turning the tide of history. Although the metaphor of the “tide of history” has a power that long predates the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with Marxism it ceases to be a metaphor and becomes a conceptual understatement. History is headed relentlessly toward a single end, whereas a tide ebbs and flows.

With the situation in Algiers as it was, it was prudent in 1960 for Bourdieu to accept a call to return to Paris to a post as general secretary in the newly established Centre de la Sociologie Européenne, headed by another philosopher-sociologist, Raymond Aron. Aron had come to sociology in the period from the late 1940s through the 1950s when philosophers were training their sights on particular disciplines, as Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1945) had done with the psychology of

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<sup>6</sup> He adds, in his characteristic self-analytical fashion, that “The new prestige that Lévi-Strauss had given that science probably helped me greatly...”.

perception, Georges Canguilhem (1955) with the history of the concept of reflexes, and Michel Foucault with psychiatry and its predecessors (1961). Aron gained widespread fame in 1955 with *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, a clear-eyed critique of contemporary Marxism, including what would become a requisite dismantling of Sartre, also performed by Merleau-Ponty (1955), Lévi-Strauss (1962) and eventually Bourdieu himself (1972).

This was also when the impact of linguistics was gathering force, with the belated impact of the *Course in General Linguistics* (Saussure, 1916) on Lévi-Strauss's ethnography, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis and Roland Barthes' cultural and literary analysis, to name just the most prominent. As mentioned earlier, Bourdieu gave a course on Saussure in Algiers in 1959, and in addition, he writes of having "undertaken, before it became fashionable, an academic study (fortunately never published) which rested on a methodical 'reading' of the *Course in General Linguistics* in order to establish a 'general theory of culture'" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 32). Echoing his experience of colonialism, he reflects that this undertaking meant that "I was perhaps more sensitive than others to the most visible effects of the domination exercised by the sovereign discipline" (ibid.).

Sociology was amongst the fields most resistant to structuralism – not that the mainstream of any field embraced it. Structuralism followed a different path in France from that in other countries, becoming a trendy label in the second half of the 1950s, and identifying a group of intellectual figures who did not necessarily have much in common, and certainly did not agree on a unified structural method. Bourdieu's early work coincided with the high-water mark of this structuralism, and his unique refusal of key structuralist principles whilst accepting others meant that he had adversaries on all sides.

His writings on language were no exception. In North America, sociolinguists were pursuing a programme laid out (a bit belatedly) in Weinreich, Herzog & Labov (1968) which had such a different methodological focus from Bourdieu's work that, although Bourdieu named Labov as one of four of his American contemporaries who are highly "present and important" in his research (Bourdieu,

2004, p. 13),<sup>7</sup> it was hard for Anglophone sociolinguists to see Bourdieu's relevance for their work. This changed in the 1980s and 1990s, as what is now called "first wave" variationism, seeking fine-grained correlations of sounds and forms with pre-set categories of gender, age group and social class, in addition to geographical patterns, to a "third wave" in which reconciliations were made with the enquiries carried out in the sociology of language and in linguistic anthropology (see Woschitz, 2019). Bourdieu's work on language received much attention in these years, not just from sociolinguists but from applied linguists who were interested in the role of education in his account of language socialisation. Simultaneously, his sociological work was being received as central rather than marginal, in France and beyond.

Some aspects of Bourdieu's approach have become part of the common parlance of sociolinguists and applied linguistics, such as the concept of cultural and academic "capital" which is tied to the use of "legitimated" forms of language. Other aspects are less widely accepted, including his concept of the habitus, though the following pages will show that rejections of it have been based on incomplete representations of what it means.

### **3 Structure, subject and history**

The appeal of structuralism lay for many in its repositioning of the analysis of language, thought and action away from what is often referred to as the "Cartesian subject", the *I* who says *I think, therefore I am*, and is endowed with an ability, absolute in principle, to transform thought and desire into action.<sup>8</sup> In an earlier time, this conception provided people with a sense of liberation from the conception of human beings as – although endowed with free will – acting under the constraints of an innate idea of God and fear of eternal punishment for making choices not guided

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<sup>7</sup> The others were Aaron Cicourel, Robert Darnton and Charles Tilly.

<sup>8</sup> The word *subject* in this context was taken over from its use in grammar, where it designates the person who performs the action of the verb – confusingly, since in politics and law it continues to have the opposite meaning of someone who is subject to the power of a monarch or other authority. The "Cartesian subject" is a doubly unfortunate term, since it rests on an oversimplification of Descartes, as amply demonstrated by Baker & Morris (1996); see further Joseph (2018).

by that innate idea. By the mid-twentieth century, however, the Cartesian subject had assumed the status of secular dogma, such that, ironically, in order to succeed within the academic system one had no choice but to assert the idea of absolutely free choice.

Structuralism offered an intellectually respectable way out of the quandary, by demonstrating the existence of socially shared semiotic structures of knowing. This came as no surprise to linguists, who did not need to have it revealed to them that utterances are not the wholly free inventions of those who utter them, but follow patterns which constitute what we call grammar. More precisely, if they are wholly free inventions, they are not understood by others, and would be considered at best a private language, and at worst raving, but not a language in the usual sense. What structuralism revealed to linguists was that the patterns do not simply exist *in* the language – they actually *are* the language. What creates meaning are not the elements of the language but the difference between the elements.

That was a difficult enough revelation for linguists to accept, but for philosophers and specialists in areas other than language it turned things upside down to have it suggested that, as in language, the patterns of thought and action in their areas are patterned, not in the way that a human creator or author patterns things, but by an internal system of differences that gives meaning-value to the signs which constitute everything knowable, signs which are socially shared. Nothing, then, is solely the result of the agentive choices of an individual subject. Agency is shared between subject and social structures. Again, one might expect this to be seen as the opposite of a liberation – but in the context of an academic system which had turned subject agency into dogma, it was the opposite: and that in itself shows how meaning cannot be understood theoretically, in isolation from conditions on the ground.

The second liberation which structuralism offered was driven more by what those desirous of being liberated wanted to find in it than by what structural linguistics actually stood for. This was its supposed denial of history. The liberation in this case was from the Marxist doctrine of history as the unstoppable teleological engine. That is how structuralism was received, including by those

doctrinaire Marxists who saw it not as a liberation at all, but as counter-revolutionary: the structures which it discovered stood beyond the control of individuals to create or change them, and hence outside history, which meant that they were not superstructural products of a base located in work, production and class struggle. The more these structures were understood as static, detached from time, the fuller the liberation they offered from Marxist orthodoxy.

If we go back to Saussure, we find a very different picture, despite some shared elements from which the structure-versus-history position arose. In the years when Saussure studied and practised linguistics, the field was dominated, indeed defined, by analysis of the historical development of languages, particularly those of the Indo-European family. One began with the earliest surviving texts in a given language and compared them with later ones in “the same” language (e.g. Old and Modern English) or in “daughter” languages (e.g. Latin and the Romance languages), and tracked the changes in sounds and forms. One also did a horizontal comparison of “sister” languages, using the earliest texts of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Old Persian, Slavic, Germanic, Celtic and other Indo-European languages, in order to reconstruct the prehistoric sounds and forms of the “mother” language that could be cogently taken to have given rise to all the later ones. These investigations were done a vowel or consonant at a time, or a set of noun or verb endings at a time, to determine for instance which Proto-Indo-European vowel gave the different stressed vowels of the later words for *five*, Latin *quínque*, Greek *pénτε*, Sanskrit *páncha*. The answer was sought in how the vowels were articulated and how surrounding sounds caused them to change.

Saussure asked a further question: what impact did the change, whatever its cause, have on the system of vowels as a whole? To answer that required imagining the full inventory of sounds in the original proto-Indo-European language. As he did so, Saussure realised that the most efficient explanation was that the mother language originally had just one single vowel. It did not actually matter how it was pronounced. At a certain point, though, people started colouring it one way in some contexts and another way in others, and from then on there was a *difference* that could be used to signify different verb tenses, or different concepts. The result was a whole new system. For



speakers of Greek, the prehistoric development of the *é* of *pénte* is irrelevant; what is significant is the distinction between *pénte* and *pánte* ('every way') at a particular stage of the language.

If that sounds like a rejection of diachrony in favour of synchrony, it is not. Rather, it is the very concept of diachronic linguistics, which Saussure introduced: the comparison of whole language systems at different stages in time, rather than tracing individual elements through time, as historical linguists did. Diachronic is not a synonym for historical in this context, but its antonym. Diachronic analysis requires synchronic analysis as its initial step, and in that sense synchrony has priority – but given that all the work Saussure published over his professional career was diachronic in nature, it is deeply inaccurate to say (as one sees all too often) that his aim was to replace diachronic with synchronic linguistic enquiry.

Neither did Saussure exclude the Subject from linguistic enquiry. His division of *langue*, the socially-shared language system, and *parole*, the utterances produced by an individual speaker, was made precisely in order to distinguish what belongs to each, and although he focussed in his courses on the linguistics of *langue*, he made clear his intention to move on to the linguistics of *parole* – but his death at the age of fifty-five intervened. Despite his statements about the linguistics of *parole*, it is frequently asserted that Saussure meant for linguistics to concern itself with *langue* only, based on the closing sentence of the Course in General Linguistics: "Linguistics has as its unique and veritable object the language system envisaged in itself and for itself". Out of context, this appears to be a banishment of *parole* from linguistics; but in fact this sentence, which was written by the editors of the Course and has no counterpart in Saussure's drafts or his students' notes, closes a chapter on language families and types, in which Saussure warns against the tendency to imagine that the "genius of a race" leads its language in certain deterministic directions. Saussure consistently rejected purported links between language and ethnicity. In that regard, linguistics should indeed be concerned with the language alone rather than with race psychology as it had been developing ever since linguists had established the original unity of Indo-European culture, and linked language type to worldview.

The closing sentence was read, not as the noble-minded ending of a chapter taking up arms against racial determinism, but as the narrow-minded conclusion of the book as a whole. Structuralism developed under the misunderstanding that it was launched by Saussure as a theory denying the role of either Subject or History, dogmatically asserting a reductionist view of language, thought and action as the product of static structures, reproduced by the individual, who is unaware of their existence and yet under their control, quite as much as – or even more than – the individual in Marxism is pulled along by the tide of economic and political History. But if the internal consistency of the structuralist system of ideas runs counter to what Saussure intended in launching it, then this is itself a case where structuralists will contend that history needs to be set aside in favour of a focus on the conceptual system within its own synchronic terms.

With both Subject and History, Bourdieu aims to replace either-or with both-and. The Cartesian-Sartrean thesis is that people are free agents; the structuralist antithesis is that their actions are determined. Bourdieu's synthesis begins by redefining the Subject itself in structuralist terms, as a position defined by its difference from other positions within a given social field; doing this already transcends the structuralist antithesis quite as much it transcends the thesis. With History, the Marxist thesis defines it broadly enough for it to be construed as the factor determining all (super)structures; the structuralist antithesis is that history is irrelevant. Bourdieu's synthesis begins by pointing out that history is not History, and that however much one may wish to escape from the latter, it is self-defeating to ignore how structures are *generated*, in social groups and in individuals. In the estimation of his biographer, Bourdieu

is able to find within structuralism the critique of subjecthood necessary for emancipation from classical philosophy; he is equally able to emancipate himself from this emancipation, in order to find his own objective definition of subjecthood. What he retains from structuralism, which corroborates his initial intuitions, is the relational definition of the agent, along with the determining nature of the symbolic dimension of human experience. His critique of

structuralist ahistoricity will lead to his taking into account the processes of becoming, and his self-designation as a genetic structuralist. (Lescourret, 2008, p. 76, my translation)

This self-designation was only occasional, the occasions being mainly when he was asked in interviews whether he was a structuralist. This response, with the stress on “genetic” – how structures are generated, small-h historically – was intentionally oxymoronic, a challenge to and refusal of the question which implied a narrow definition of structuralist. Bourdieu described his approach as refusing to “reduce the agents whom it takes as eminently active and acting (without however turning them into Subjects) to simple epiphenomena of structure” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 9). In the same disruptive, oxymoronic spirit, he told a California audience in 1986 that if he had to apply a label to his work, “I would talk of *constructivist structuralism* or of *structuralist constructivism*, taking the word structuralist in a sense very different from that given to it by the Saussurean or Lévi-Straussian tradition” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 123).

In arguing for the need to restore the balance between structure and agency and to find a way of comprehending their interaction, Bourdieu was having to convince an academic corps whose younger members had lost their faith in the individual Subject, which the general reading public was embracing more than ever thanks to the new lease of life given to it by the existentialism of Sartre and his circle,<sup>9</sup> despite the ambiguities and contradictions stemming from his ongoing adherence to Communist Party doctrine. Althusser’s (1965) structuralist reading of Marx made the situation more rather than less complicated where the younger generation of academics was concerned, but in general had the effect of neutralising attempts by Marxists to paint structuralism as a bourgeois, right-wing, counter-revolutionary movement.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu (1990, p. 4) remarked in an interview that “Many of the intellectual leanings that I share with the ‘structuralist’ generation (especially Althusser and Foucault) – which I do not consider myself to be a part of, firstly because I am separated from them by an academic generation (I went to their lectures) and also because I rejected what seemed to me to be a fad – can be explained by the need to react against what existentialism had represented for them [...]”.

<sup>10</sup> As Foucault told a Swedish interviewer, “You understand what Sartre’s and Garaudy’s manoeuvre consists of when they claim that structuralism is a typical right-wing ideology. It allows them to portray as accomplices of the right people who are actually to the left of them. It allows them as well to present themselves as the sole representatives of the French and Communist left. But it’s only a manoeuvre” (Eriksson, 1968; my translation)

If ever a writer was self-aware of his position in relation to his potential audience, and capable of anticipating the reception that his rhetorical tactics would meet with, it was Bourdieu. Giving insufficient space to the role played by social structure would risk losing the ear of Marxists and structuralists alike, which he needed in order to achieve his aim of re-establishing a space for the Subject. Not the Cartesian or Sartrean Subject, but an “agent” much closer to the Subject as it had been reconceived by Merleau-Ponty. Asked by an interviewer what the principle was behind his doubt about structuralism, he replied: “I wanted, so to speak, to reintroduce agents that Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists, among others Althusser, tended to abolish, making them into simple epiphenomena of structure. And I mean agents, not subjects” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 9).

#### 4      **Flesh and habitus**

The extent of Bourdieu’s debt to Merleau-Ponty is underappreciated, mainly, no doubt, because of Bourdieu being classified as a sociologist rather than a philosopher. It is one of the strength’s of Lescourret’s biography to highlight their continuity.

Bourdieu is indebted to Merleau-Ponty for his rehabilitation of the body as the support for the historical incorporation of knowledge and the contribution of the emotions to language. He will make use of it in his elaboration of the notion of habitus. He owes to him as well what he calls “his basic culture”, the importance of the rule in *The Structure of Behaviour*. In sum, Merleau-Ponty already encourages the philosopher’s gradual shift toward sociology, in the company of the scholar he critiques in *Signs*: Claude Lévi-Strauss. (Lescourret, 2008, p. 139, my translation)<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, Bourdieu’s early studies of Algeria, including the opening chapters of Bourdieu (1969), read more like Lévi-Straussian ethnography than like garden-variety sociology. With regard to Merleau-

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from the French version in Eribon, 1989, p. 194). Roger Garaudy was a hard-line adherent to the Communist Party line who had attacked Foucault (Garaudy, 1967) following Sartre’s depiction of Foucault (1966) as an attack on Marxism (Sartre, 1966; see further Eribon, 1989, pp. 191–192).

<sup>11</sup> Lescourret is right about the importance of Merleau-Ponty (1942) for Bourdieu, but underplays his no less great continuity with Merleau-Ponty’s later work, starting with his *magnum opus* of 1945.

Ponty, his importance in philosophy centres on his reconceiving of the Subject as something more than the traditional Cartesian *cogito* standing in oppositional contrast to the Objects which it knows.

The classical model of mind cannot accommodate the “social” except by turning it into a feature or image in the mind of the individual, the first step toward “naturalising” it. For Freud the social is represented by the super-ego; but the Freudian subconscious is effectively absent from the contemporary discourse on mind and language, except critically, including among Lacanians.

Amongst contemporary approaches to mind which are “transcranial” – not restricted to knowledge conceived as being stored in the brain – distributed and situated cognition treat the individual perspective as the dominant view that needs to be resisted (see Joseph, 2017, 2018). Extended and embodied cognition are more about expansion than resistance, but both must contend with a traditional approach centred on the individual subject. In that regard they come closer to the concerns of Bourdieu, who focussed seriously and relentlessly on the problem of reconciling a belief in real agency with the fact that, as agents, we nevertheless make and carry out our choices within the contexts and constraints of a social world. Yet it is rare to encounter Bourdieu’s name in the literature on cognition.

Bourdieu treats habitus essentially as “a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways” (Thompson, intro. to Bourdieu, 1991, p. 12), dispositions which sediment within us through social interaction from childhood onward, and that become a physical part of our nervous system. These dispositions are inculcated into us from early childhood, and they generate practices that are regular without being governed by any “rule”. The habitus is inhabited by an active human agent who is defined by the system but, crucially, is not merely its passive object. The agent engages in exchanges of symbolic power with other agents, each of whose habitus is linked to the rest in the shared field.

In Merleau-Ponty's manuscript notes for his 1954 course on "The problem of speech",<sup>12</sup> the speaking Subject is defined as Subject by his or her *langue*, as manifested through *parole*, whilst at the same time the Subject and his or her *parole* bringing the *langue* into existence. Merleau-Ponty ties language to the *corps propre* (usually translated as the "lived body"), outside which consciousness can have no existence. In his later work this will be reworked into his conception of *la chair* "flesh". Forms and structures, including behaviour, are not in the world independently of human perception, but come into existence through the meanings that we, as Subjects, read into things-in-themselves. But neither do those things "exist" until human consciousness of them turn them into things-*for*-themselves. The "problem" of speech is its chicken-and-egg relationship to, on the one hand, a language, understood as a Saussurean system of differences, and on the other to a speaking Subject. In both cases, speech appears to presuppose the existence of the system or the Subject which are themselves brought into existence by speech. And, again, what is true of a Subject is equally true of an Object: it is not the case that Objects exist mutely before speech promotes them to Subjecthood. Rather, neither Subject nor Object can exist without the other; they are brought into existence simultaneously, by speech, just as the Saussurean signified comes into existence jointly with its signifier.

Merleau-Ponty's *chair* is part of the philosophical background to Bourdieu's resurrection of the habitus. The word *habitus* appears in his early description of the motor movements that make up the "corporeal habitus" of the peasants of his native Béarn region of southwest France, on the occasion of the "Bachelors' Ball", held at Christmas and New Year, when many of the young Béarnais who have emigrated to Paris and other cities are back home.

Hence, this little country ball is the occasion of a veritable shock of civilisations. With it, the whole urban world, with its cultural models, its music, its dances, its body techniques, erupts into peasant life. [...] We must recognise that body techniques constitute veritable systems, in

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<sup>12</sup> Le problème de la parole (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Vol. XII – Collège de France 1953-1954, Cours du jeudi).

solidarity with an entire cultural context. This is not the place to analyse the motor habits characteristic of the Béarnais peasant, this *habitus*, which betrays the *paysanás*, the oafish peasant. Popular observation perfectly grasps this *hexis* which serves as the basis of the stereotypes. [...] The critical observation of the city-dwellers, skillful at perceiving the *habitus* of the peasant as a veritable synthetic unit, stresses the slowness and heaviness of the gait [...]. In effect, just as the dances of times gone by were in solidarity with the whole peasant civilisation, so modern dances are with urban civilisation; by requiring the adoption of new bodily usages, they claim a veritable change of “nature”, the bodily *habitus* being what is lived as most natural, that upon which conscious action has no grip. (Bourdieu, 1962, pp. 99-100, my translation)<sup>13</sup>

*Habitus* appears here alongside Greek *hexis*, of which *habitus* is St Thomas Aquinas’s Latin translation in the *Summa Theologica* (1269). Aristotle describes *hexis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as “an acquired yet entrenched state of moral character that orients our feelings and desires, and thence our conduct”. With Aquinas, *habitus* “acquired the added sense of ability for growth through activity, or durable disposition suspended midway between potency and purposeful action” (Bourke, 1942, cited by Wacquant, 2018).

Wacquant’s (2018) historical account of the concept recognises the link to Merleau-Ponty, and in addition its use by Norbert Elias, who as a student in the 1920s attended lectures by Edmund Husserl. The lectures on Descartes which Husserl gave in Paris in 1939 would set Merleau-Ponty on course toward phenomenology. Numerous other twentieth-century philosophers used the term, in varying senses, as did the psychoanalyst Lacan (see Fugier, 2006), and the principal figures of French sociology, Durkheim and Mauss. Although Bourdieu denied substantial links between their sociology and his own, what Mauss wrote in 1934 is very close to Bourdieu’s later position:

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<sup>13</sup> The last word, *prise* “grip”, figures prominently in the later work of Merleau-Ponty.

I have thus had for many years this notion of the social nature of the “habitus”. I ask you to note that I say in good Latin, understood in France, “habitus”. The word translates, infinitely better than does *habitude* (habit), Aristotle’s *hexis*, the “acquired” and the “faculty” (Aristotle was a psychologist). It does not designate these metaphysical habits, this mysterious “memory”, the subject of volumes or or brief and famous theses. These “habits” vary not only with individuals and their imitations, they vary above all by societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges. They must be viewed as techniques and the work of practical reason, collective and individual, where we normally see only the mind and its faculties of repetition. (Mauss, 1936, my transl.)

The term *les techniques du corps* (body techniques), which serves as the title of this article by Mauss, appears twice in the quotation above from Bourdieu’s 1962 article, which does not mention Mauss in connection with this term but cites him on a related point.

Wacquant leaves aside Bourdieu’s own emphasis on how the writings of Erwin Panofsky inspired his use of habitus. In particular, an essay by Panofsky on Gothic Architecture and Scholastic Thought (1951), translated into French by Bourdieu in 1967,<sup>14</sup> succinctly lays out the thesis that the architects of the High Gothic period were translating into the visual realm what the theologian-philosophers of the same or immediately preceding period were introducing as new organising principles of knowledge: a search for clarity, *manifestio*, in the form of how the great *summa* of knowledge are planned and arranged. Their weight is sustained by tripartite divisions, with a theological, trinitarian significance that helps to guarantee the support which the massive work requires. So too novel tripartite divisions introduced into cathedral architecture make possible the sustaining of massive weight without the opaque walls of the Romanesque, so that light – transparency – is brought into the structure.

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<sup>14</sup> The Bourdieu translation also includes Panofsky (1946). On Bourdieu’s embrace and subsequent distancing from Panofsky’s work, see Holsinger (2005), pp. 111-113.



Panofsky does not use the word *habitus*. He does refer to another Latin concept, *intuitus*, the “resources of private sensory and psychological experience” onto which both “mysticism and nominalism throw the individual back” (Panofsky, 1951, p. 14), and contrasts this with “a mental habit” characterising both Gothic art and scholasticism, namely

a “principle that regulates the act” (*principium importans ordinem ad actum*). Such mental habits are at work in all and every civilization. All modern writing on history is permeated by the idea of evolution ([...]); and all of us, without a thorough knowledge of biochemistry or psychoanalysis, speak with the greatest of ease of vitamin deficiencies, allergies, mother fixations, and inferiority complexes. (ibid., p. 21)<sup>15</sup>

This mental habit has in common with Bourdieu’s *habitus* the feature of *importans ordinem*, literally “importing order” into action, yet it does not seem to be what particularly struck Bourdieu in Panofsky – certainly not so much as Panofsky’s claim, a few pages on, Panofsky that this mental habit had less to do with ideas as such as with how ideas are generated.

When asking in what manner the mental habit induced by Early and High Scholasticism may have affected the formation of Early and High Gothic architecture, we shall do well to disregard the notional content of the doctrine and to concentrate, to borrow a term from the schoolmen themselves, upon its *modus operandi*. (ibid., p. 27)

This becomes a recurrent theme in Bourdieu’s work. Early on, he distances himself from structuralism on the grounds that it is focussed on what he calls the *opus operatum*, the structures as they appear once completed, and instead aligns himself with Chomsky and his “generative grammar”, understood as being the search for the *modus operandi*, the ways in which meaning is generated (see Bourdieu, 1972). This was in fact the Scholastic undertaking where language was concerned: discovering and analysing the various *modi significandi*. But Bourdieu would soon realise

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<sup>15</sup> Panofsky attributes the Latin phrase to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, qu. 49, art. 3, c. Cf. Bourdieu (1990, pp. 78-79), where *principium importans ordinem ad actum* is equated with “practical models” (*schèmes pratiques*) and is translated more literally (apart from the pluralisation) as “principles imposing order on action”.

that this was not actually Chomsky's programme. The word "generative" was deceptive: Chomsky himself has insisted for decades that it means nothing more or less than "explicit", and work in generative grammar is very much the search for the *opus operatum*.

One thing more is bound to have drawn Bourdieu to Panofsky: his attention to what he identifies as the second controlling principle of Scholasticism, after *manifestio*, namely *concordantia*, "the ACCEPTANCE AND ULTIMATE RECONCILIATION OF CONTRADICTORY POSSIBILITIES" (ibid., p. 64). Not *sic aut non*, yes or no, but *sic et non*, yes and (yet) no. *Concordantia* is the essence of Bourdieu's concept of habitus: not determined, not free, but determined and yet free.<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu stressed repeatedly that habitus is to be understood as a way of thinking and investigating, rather than as some sort of substance.

[T]he notion of habitus expresses first and foremost the rejection of a whole series of alternatives into which social science (and more generally, all of anthropological theory) has locked itself, that of consciousness (or of subject) and of the unconscious, that of Finalism and of Mechanicalism, etc... [...] At the time [when I introduced it] the notion of habitus allowed me to break away from the structuralist paradigm without falling back into the old philosophy of the subject or of consciousness, that of classical economy and of its *home economicus* which is back these days under the new name of methodological individualism. (Bourdieu, 1985)

It was, in other words, his escape route from Marx, Freud and the structuralists, so that his own thinking would not be determined by them and what they had written, but would be genuinely his own thinking. "In retrospect", he said in 1985, "the use of the notion of *habitus* [...] can be understood as a way of escaping from the choice between a structuralism without subject and the philosophy of the subject" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 10). But, he laments,

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<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the life of the Abbot Suger, master of possibly the greatest of Gothic cathedrals, St-Denis, was, by Panofsky's account, a matter of steering a course between the ascetic St Bernard and those cathedral masters who performed their power through self-indulgence. One wonders whether Bourdieu would have been drawn to translate and publish that account if he did not feel an affinity with Suger as he steered his own course between determinism and agency.

Unfortunately, people apply to my analyses – and this is the principal source of misunderstanding – the very alternatives that the notion of habitus is meant to exclude, those of consciousness and the unconscious, of explanation by determining causes or by final causes. Thus Lévi-Strauss sees in the theory of matrimonial strategies a form of spontaneism and a return to the philosophy of the subject. Others, on the contrary, will see in it the extreme form of what they reject in the sociological way of thinking: determinism and the abolition of the subject. (ibid.)

## **5 Symbolic capital, symbolic power**

When Bourdieu deals with symbolic capital and power, his touchstone is often Max Weber, who described himself as a “political economist”. Since the political is about power, and the economic about capital, the reference is appropriate, though so wide-ranging are Weber’s writings that it is not always a single work of his that has inspired a particular concept of Bourdieu’s. Weber’s posthumously published essay “Class, status, party” begins with a statement about “law” that applies ambiguously to both juridical law and scientific observation of behaviour:

Law exists when there is a probability that an order will be upheld by a specific staff of men who will use physical or psychical compulsion with the intention of obtaining conformity with the order, or of inflicting sanctions for infringement of it. The structure of every legal order directly influences the distribution of power, economic or otherwise, within its respective community. This is true of all legal orders and not only that of the state. In general, we understand by “power” the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action. (Weber, 1945, p. 180)

Related to Bourdieu’s concept of capital is the use he makes of *interest*, which his fellow academics, especially the Marxists, particularly represented, and resented, when applied to them in its double or perhaps triple meaning: the interest they take in their field of study, in an intellectual sense, is

joined to an interest in the political sense, and ultimately in the economic sense. Here too he points to Weber as an inspiration: "On this score, I feel very close to Max Weber who utilized the economic model to extend materialist critique into the realm of religion and to uncover the specific interests of the great protagonists of the religious game, priests, prophets, sorcerers, in the competition which opposes them to one another" (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 106-107).

Bourdieu applies this form of analysis specifically to language, and how particular ways of speaking become normalised and legitimated, creating possibilities for symbolic domination.

The distinctiveness of symbolic domination lies precisely in the fact that it assumes, of those who submit to it, an attitude which challenges the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint. The "choices" of the habitus (for example, using the "received" uvular "r" instead of the rolled "r" in the presence of legitimate speakers) are dispositions which, although they are unquestionably the product of social determinisms, are also constituted outside the spheres of consciousness and constraint. The propensity to reduce the search for causes to a search for responsibilities makes it impossible to see that *intimidation*, a symbolic violence which is not aware of what it is (to the extent that it implies no *act of intimidation*) can only be exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it, whereas others will ignore it.

(Bourdieu, 1991, p. 51)

This passage is autobiographical, reflecting Bourdieu's experience on arriving in Paris for the first time, to undertake his studies. He was one of those predisposed to feel the intimidation of the patronising smile of Parisians upon hearing his "quaint" regional French. His way of speaking changed quickly and markedly in response – but never to the point of his personal history being beyond detection by others.

Bourdieu does not reserve the term symbolic violence for cases of felt condescension, however. "Official nomination, in other words the act by which one grants someone a title, a socially recognized qualification, is one of the most typical demonstrations of that monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence which belongs to the state or to its representatives. [...O]ne may generalize

Weber's famous formula and see in the state the holder of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence. Or, more precisely, the state is a referee, albeit a very powerful one, in struggles over this monopoly" (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 135-137).

Bourdieu makes it perfectly clear that individuals can, in a wilful, active way, undo any identities into which they were socialised, where "identities" are understood not as objective categories, but as categories through which we are perceived by others with whom we come in contact, and in many cases, through which we perceive ourselves. These perceptions then affect how we are placed relatively to others, within a social hierarchy, or rather a network of social hierarchies. The word hierarchy itself implies an unequal standing, and it is into this standing that perceptions of us feed. Within a social field, the hierarchical positioning is both determined by, and determines, what each of us possesses relative to others, in terms of powers, goods, rights – a combination of economic and symbolic goods. This constitutes "capital" in the sense that possessing it gives one automatically the means of increasing it.

Symbolic and economic capital exist in a complex relationship. Bourdieu's most widely read book, *Distinction* (1984), begins with a chapter focussing on how tastes in art and music correlate closely with social class as measured by educational level and occupation. Bourdieu is quick to point out however that statistical correlations in themselves are meaningless. They acquire meaning through interpretative explanation (which is why any division between "qualitative" and "quantitative" research is illusory: all research is "qualitative", regardless of what it does or does not do with numbers). The correlation between appreciation of "high" art and "higher" education has in part to do with how "schooling provides the linguistic tools and the references which enable aesthetic experience to be expressed and to be constituted by being expressed" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 46), such as the vocabulary appropriate to "legitimate" description of a work of art or one's own reaction to it, and the references to art movements, categories and other artists which again both situate and legitimate. Deploying these cultural resources can only increase one's capital. Beyond that, however, the sociologist needs to consider

the dependence of the aesthetic disposition on the past and present material conditions of existence which are the precondition of both its constitution and its application and also of the accumulation of a cultural capital (whether or not educationally sanctioned) which can only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity. These conditions of existence, which are the precondition for all learning of legitimate culture, whether implicit and diffuse, as domestic cultural training generally is, or explicit and specific, as in scholastic training, are characterized by the suspension and removal of economic necessity and by objective and subjective distance from practical urgencies, which is the basis of objective and subjective distance from groups subjected to those determinisms. (ibid.)

This distancing from economic necessity and practical urgencies cannot be left out of an explanation of why those with economic capital, or whose parents had it, have had more opportunity to frequent galleries and attend concerts, giving them the resources to go on increasing their cultural capital through their reaction to each new aesthetic experience, whether it is positive or negative (remembering that the archetypal “snob” looks down on most art). The questionnaire research on which Bourdieu’s book is based shows how the middle and especially the working classes react especially strongly, in a negative way, to a painting which they perceive as not having had much work put into it – which is not an acceptable, “legitimate” reaction for the professional critic or the upper-class aesthete, who is licensed only to pronounce on the “vision” and the product of its execution, not the process.

The preceding quote ends with a reference to “determinisms”, and over the remaining twenty-five years of his life Bourdieu would come to regret his use of that word, which would lead or license some critics to characterise his thinking as totally “deterministic”. He does not conceive of the field as static:

The dispositions constituting the cultivated habitus are only formed, only function and are only valid in a field, in the relationship with a field which, as Gaston Bachelard says of the physical field, is itself a “field of possible forces”, a “dynamic situation”, in which forces are

only manifested in their relationship with certain dispositions. This is why the same practices may receive opposite meanings and values in different fields, in different configurations or in opposing sectors of the same field. (ibid., p. 87, citing Bachelard, 1965, p. 60)

The projecting of identities onto one person by another is itself subject to assumptions and inclinations that are part of the habitus of the person doing the projecting – shaped, though not determined, by their experience, especially when it is being done unreflectively, but not only then. Pennycook (2001, p. 126) identifies deliberate intervention as the side of human social behaviour that Bourdieu fails to explain, but that was not what he set out to explain. Deliberate individual action does not actually pose a “social” problem per se. The problem is how to explain the actions agents undertake that are not deliberate, and the cases where they undertake a deliberate course of action but find themselves unable to achieve it because of their own strong dispositions.

Similarly to Pennycook, Jenkins (1992) says that Bourdieu fails to show how actors can actually intervene to change how things happen. Silverstein (2003) and linguistic anthropologists working within his paradigm of orders of indexicality have been similarly dismissive. Agha’s (2003) presentation of habitus as a quasi-behaviourist claim that habits rather than agency shape our choices and our actions makes it appear that there is a wide chasm between Bourdieu and the linguistic anthropologists, when in fact the differences between them are really about which questions they have set out to answer.

For Bourdieu, habitus is a model for understanding how we really do act as agents, making deliberate choices within the parameters of a social field that accords a value to our acts, a value of which we develop an instinctive, corporeal cognition through sedimented experience. Linguistic anthropologists want instead to focus on the particular moments of exchange in which agency is performed linguistically, and to treat that agency as unconstrained, determining value anew on each occasion, within the “orders of indexicality” which appear, à la Foucault, to inhere in a context of institutional power, and ultimately in institutions themselves. The question of how the individual experiences them, central to Bourdieu’s concerns, is left in the background. Agha wants to

characterise them in terms of “sedimentation” from exchanges, a view that is really much closer to Bourdieu than Agha seems to appreciate; Silverstein wants to locate them in the language itself, which places him closer to classical structuralism than Bourdieu was.

For some critics of Bourdieu, symbolic capital and power are problematic because, even if one accepts them as informal concepts identifying aspects of interpersonal experience, they suffer from the double weakness that they cannot be pinned down to anything directly observable (“that invisible power”, Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164; see also Hanks, 2005, pp. 77-78), let alone quantifiable, and yet they reify processes that are inherently fluid and interactional, turning them into structural attributes of an individual. The first of these is a weakness to those who see themselves as practising science, the second to those who perceive structuralism (including, in their eyes, Bourdieu) as ahistorical and incapable of accounting for non-deterministic agentive action.

Germ theory predates the development of microscopes powerful enough to allow the human eye to see the various organisms that had been hypothesised as causing disease. These hypotheses were always contested, on grounds similar to those raised against Bourdieu’s concepts; in fact germ theory is still contested by some today.<sup>17</sup> The controversy helped to motivate the development of the high-powered equipment that allowed germs to move from the category of theoretical beings to observable ones. If symbolic capital and power cannot be observed directly, only through their effects, this does not prove that they are illusory metaphors; theorising them is the necessary first step to determining what exactly they are and how they operate, and if they ever prove to be quantifiable, the proof will have emerged through just this process. As for the reifying, Bourdieu himself notes that “In a general way, language expresses things more easily than it does relations, states more easily than processes. To say for example of someone that he has power, or to wonder who, today, really holds power, is to think of power as a substance, a thing which certain people

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<sup>17</sup> Certainly *germ* is no more valid a scientific category than is *weed*, since it bundles together a range of very diverse organisms and non-living pathogens, including bacteria, viruses, fungi and others which have in common a capacity for transmitting infection and disease under specific circumstances, much as weeds have in common their being located in a place where they are not wanted.



hold, preserve and transmit [...]” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 189). Because language makes this so easy, it is always going to be difficult to do the necessary work of breaking down false dichotomies such as agency and determinism, work that “ceaselessly needs to be rebegun, against the progressive regression to modes of thinking that are more common, because socially founded and encouraged” (ibid., p. 36).

Anyone who imagines that substituting gerunds for nouns (e.g. *linguaging* instead of *language*) will get them and their readers clear of the reification trap is hoping for too much. It may flag up the issue, but then leave it at that – forgetting that gerunds can be read in a reified way just as nouns can, and that not all languages even have the means of making that grammatical distinction.

Bourdieu, like Foucault and other prominent figures born in the 1920s and early 1930s whose names became household words in France in the 1960s and 1970s, saw the academic establishment as the Great Bastion of Received Thought that had to be smashed through. Their natural allies should have been the Marxists, but they found through hard experience that Marxism had itself become another Great Bastion of Received Thought, mirroring that of the social and religious institutions it aimed to tear down. They relied for support on those of the previous generation who had successfully pursued their own course within the established order, whilst remaining intellectually detached from it, a difficult feat to manage until one acquired a chair in the Collège de France or, like Lévi-Strauss, the ultimate prestige of the Académie française. But ultimately each of them had to make his or her own breach in the bastion.

Living that experience day-to-day, and being hyper-aware of the social significance of the actions he took, Bourdieu could not possibly have imagined himself as the passive pawn of all-determining structures. Nor could he have closed his eyes to how his actions transpired within a field of other actors like himself, with each action reconfiguring where they stood vis-à-vis one another, hence reconfiguring the whole field, just as, in Saussurean linguistics, any change in a language system produces an entirely new system; or to how implausible it would be to interpret his actions

as somehow cut off from all his previous experience. Not determined by it, but informed by it, in some ways shaped by it, yet not to the extent that he ceases to be a wilful agent, capable of – as he proved – changing the whole institutional system, overcoming such limitations as his experience might tend to place on him.

## **6 Conclusion**

A body of work that attracts the level of attention that Bourdieu's did is going to give rise to alternative readings and interpretations, which the author can never dispel entirely even if able to show that his position is quite the opposite of what this or that critic has taken it to be. Bourdieu spent a great amount of time and energy doing just that, despite often feeling particularly depressed at seeing certain academics repeat misinformation about his views gleaned at second-hand, without having read much or indeed any of his actual work. The fact that much of the dismissiveness has been based on a superficial understanding of his political position only makes sadder the loss to so many fields of enquiry of his uniquely balanced, perceptive and deeply self-aware insight into what it is to act agentively within a world of social constraints. Sad too are those who have a knee-jerk reaction against the self-analysis that Bourdieu not only refuses to exclude from his methodology but insists must be at the centre of it, if any objective analysis of others is to be reckoned valid. On the bright side, a wealth of untapped insight awaits those who are prepared to be as unfrightened as Bourdieu himself was of what others in their field might think – of reading him agentively, rather than dismissing him in conformity with deterministic social forces.

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<sup>18</sup> The translator, Channa Newman, has kindly informed me (email to the author, 1 May 2019) that she does not know whether and where the original French manuscript, intended as part of the introduction to a collection of Bourdieu's articles, was published.

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